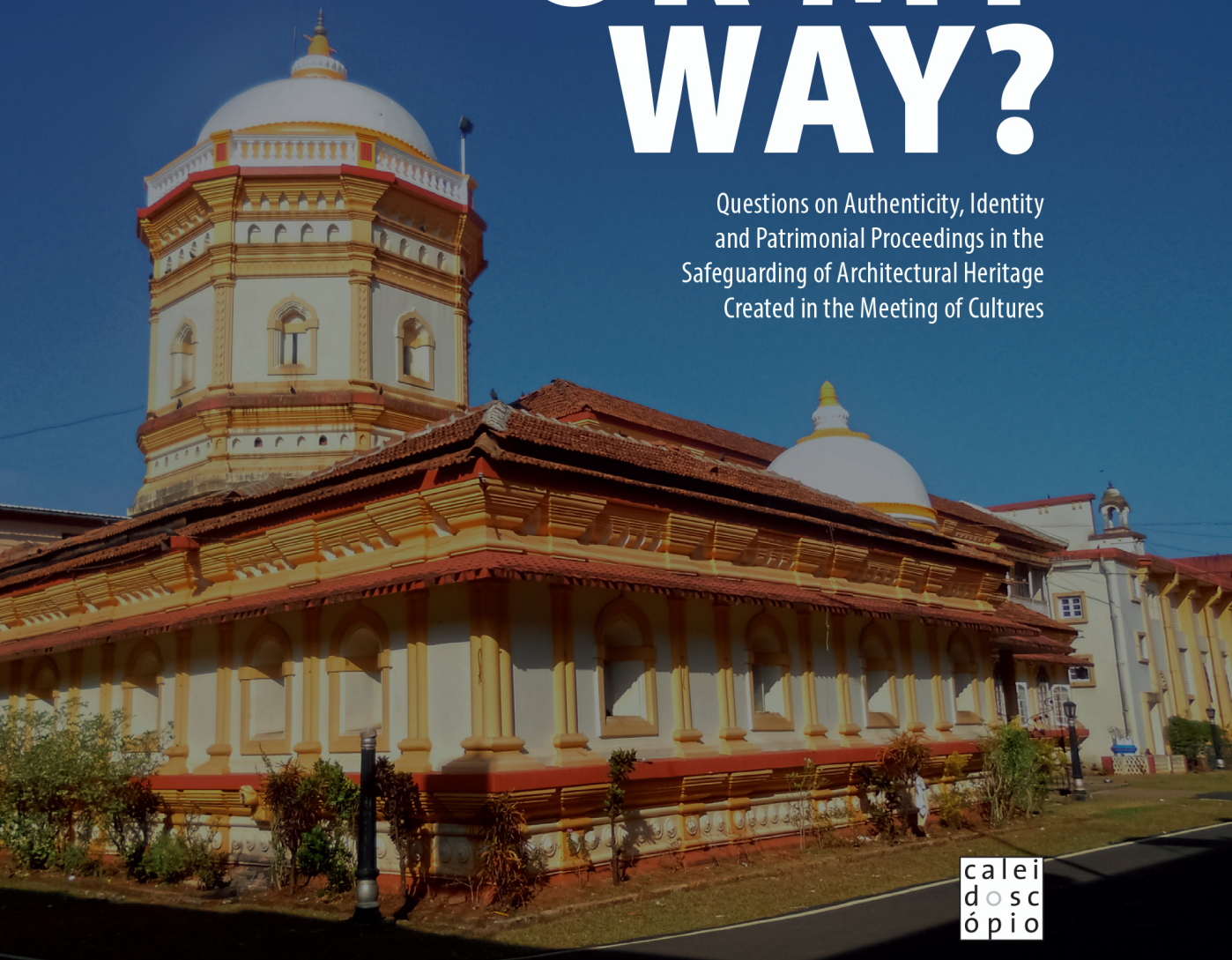
Edited by **Joaquim Rodrigues dos Santos**

PRESERVING TRANSCULTURAL HERITAGE

YOUR WAY OR MY WAY?

Questions on Authenticity, Identity and Patrimonial Proceedings in the Safeguarding of Architectural Heritage Created in the Meeting of Cultures



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Preserving Transcultural Heritage: Your Way or my Way?
Questions on Authenticity, Identity and Patrimonial Proceedings in the Safeguarding of Architectural Heritage Created in the Meeting of Cultures

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"MY CULTURE" AS A CONSTANTLY CHANGING PERCEPTION: VERNACULAR BUILT TRADITIONS IN KWAZULU-NATAL, SOUTH AFRICA

Deborah Whelan
Durban University of Technology, Durban

ABSTRACT:
Whilst vernacular built traditions may have a strongly regional basis the generic culture as appropriated is not as fixed in stone as the contemporary assertions appear to be. This paper will discuss the 'traditional' Zulu dwelling, in the light of cultural change and urbanisation, and establish the boundaries of authenticity in environments which are no longer rural, but deeply circumscribed by western imposed materials, building forms and legislations. It will question whether heritage and authenticity in this instance relates to the tangible or the intangible, and use this conclusion as a means by which architectural heritages with limited material life spans can be understood and preserved.

KEYWORDS:
traditions; Zulu; vernacular; culture; change

Introduction

Recent decades in Southern Africa have seen the resurgence of individual African identities post-apartheid, which extends to a specific ring fencing of practises and traditions orally expressed as 'it is my culture', although historically published material intimates that such traditions have often changed through internal or external forces. In addition to iterative oral sources, material cultural artefacts are often used to reinforce this identity, and in the process of reinterpretation, express a shift in that the object becomes a physical representation of a more enduring subliminal meaning.

This thought process has been exacerbated by the construction of a domical structure in the KwaZulu-Natal National Botanical Gardens in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal. In the eyes of the author, this structure is significantly inauthentic, even given the spontaneity of form and material resolution allowed in the greater scheme of building implementation. The integrity of the construction, thatching and finishing, would appear to be of less importance than is the symbolic function of the building, the domical grass beehive dwelling known as *iqhugwane*, as representative of the broader 'Zulu' nation and their way of life.

In 2015, the South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI), as part of a larger and necessary programme of increasing relevance and broadening the visitor base of the Gardens sourced quotations for the construction of a grass domed *iqhugwane*. This was part of a corporate imperative to indigenise the gardens, and make the spaces more relevant and inclusive. As part of this plan, gardens containing plants used for muthi (traditional medicine) were planted, and the displays interpreted. An area for storytelling was created out of the concrete base of an older beehive dwelling, long decayed. And the *iqhugwane* was constructed. A contractor was appointed, and the building constructed in sporadic leaps and bounds. Its completed form is more of a fantasy land construction, than one which is authentic, meaningful and contains the gravitas that these buildings display.

In short for the author, this building is a cultural travesty. Whilst the inaccuracies of the building are not lost on the Chief Horticulturalist, Miss Sthembile Zondi, what does stand out is not only the expected loss of indigenous knowledge systems to build these structures, but also the manner in which, for the builder, the form endured but not necessarily the integrity of the structural system, or the manner in which the thatching was carried out.

Whilst the author is fully cognizant of the multiple aspects of the different clan groups making up the contemporary Zulu nation and their disparate practises, this paper addresses a re-Zulufication in a province that is rapidly becoming post-Zulu. At the same time, the coherent cultural practises and material cultures of those making up the Zulu have undergone rapid change and transformed materially, structurally and symbolically, such that a single form becomes evocative of a perceived long term cultural practice.

This paper will discuss the dwellings of the Zulu people using historical documentation as well as information published over the last two centuries which address the cultural practises of the Zulu, in order to assess the authenticity of the statement 'my culture' in the light of cultural change and modernity. It assumes the symbolic meaning of the grass beehive dome as indicative of Zulu identity, embodying the physical and metaphysical interpretations of space. Please note that it will not engage in depth with details as to construction, gender and spatial arrangement, but rather focus on the building as a vital component of a significant architectural heritage in KwaZulu-Natal, and whether in fact it

is the building that is valourised, or the space and the meaning that it contains.

Further it will interrogate the potential for the continuity being not so much to do with the form and material, and the tangible, but rather authenticity embedded in space and place and connection with the ancestors.

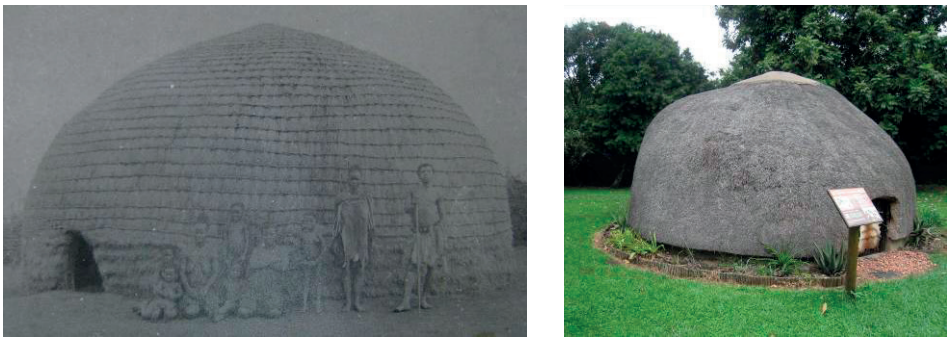

Image 1 – The contemporary beehive dwelling in the Pietermaritzburg Botanical Gardens *(Author)*. Note thatching and distorted form compared with historical archive photograph (KwaZulu-Natal Provincial Archives Repository)

Brief background to the dwellings of the Southern Nguni

KwaZulu-Natal is located on the eastern coast of Southern Africa. It is one of the most populous provinces in the country and also one of the poorest, and most traditional.

The main ethnic group is the Zulu, an agglomeration of different clan groups of the Southern Nguni people, formed in the early to mid-nineteenth century through a nationalisation process known locally as the Mfecane driven by Shaka ka Senzangakhona, of the Zulu clan.

This agglomerate is important: whilst the independent clan groups subsumed into what became the Zulu nation (in itself a problematic political construct), may readily identify themselves as 'Zulu' for many the lineage and lineage histories remain stronger: Indeed, in contemporary South Africa this is marked by increasing applications by clan groups assimilated into larger nations to reclaim their royal status.

As an agglomerate, the Zulu thus consist of different lineages with different histories, different lengths of residence in the area allowing for adaptation and regional development with respect to their built environments and associated practises and different cultural developments which resonated with the above. The 'traditional' building practises for many produce a domical grass structure known as the *iqhugwane* (*indlu* amongst the Hlubi and amaNgwane) which is constructed upon a lattice of bent laths. It differs from more southerly construction practises amongst the isiXhosa people, also of Southern Nguni descent, who construct similar buildings but with the domical framework consisting of laths planted into the ground and all culminating in a common apex (Frescura 1981). The grass is laid on the lattice with seeds down, allowing for maximum swelling in the depth of the thatch. Further some traditional practises indicate the deployment of around 11 different types of grasses in the construction of these buildings, all of which have specific functions in the creation

of the structure (Knuffel 1975). Regional variations exist with respect to the covering of these structures, with earlier immigrants using a geometrical and lozenge shaped woven decoration, and others being covered in mats, similar to the buildings constructed by earlier pastoralist peoples in Southern Africa such as the Khoe Khoen in the Western and Northern Cape. The simplest variation is a plain thatched structure, held together with looped woven grass rope with stepped thatch being more indicative of regional situation close to Mozambique and characteristic of the Tsonga people (Whelan 2001).

Frescura, particularly, sees these buildings operating on an evolutionary scale: however, it is suggested that this is not necessarily so, and rather attached to particular groups of people with common ancestries arriving in the area as part of a general southerly movement of the Southern Nguni people onto the littoral from the 15th century onwards (Guy 1994).

Whilst Kuper (1980) carried his examinations further afield, from a spatial perspective, the buildings of the Southern Nguni people, particularly those north of the Umzimkulu River,1 are characterised by strong gender separation in space, in which the man's side of the building is the right, and the woman's the left. This division is further fragmented depending on social status and position within the homestead (Argyle & Buthelezi 1992).2

Homesteads consist of one or more dwellings, one of which is typically associated with the ancestors, and is used in order to practise ritual. They are traditionally wide spread, allowing for maximum grazing between families. Traditionally, the society is polygamous, and each woman in the homestead is ranked in order of seniority, dwells in her own dwelling unit and cooks in her own kitchen and is placed on the left hand side of the main ritual dwelling or the right, depending on her seniority in the homestead. In the centre is a cattle byre, essentially also a male space,

What is common in all of these different options, including cone or dome on cylinder structures of stone, wattle and daub, sticks, and in contemporary times, brick or concrete block, is that the buildings have a fundamental similarity which is not the tangible and the aesthetic, but the practise of place: the buildings are highly gendered, and deeply associated with the ancestors, amongst a group of people who revere the ancestors through shamanic practise, with the interlocuters being known as isisangoma. This leads the author to suggest that the aesthetic markers of traditional practises are significantly less, in fact, superficial, compared with the actual meaning of the building itself.

The effects of cultural change and urbanisation

It is vital to point out at this juncture that this perhaps ethnographically generated and politically promoted ideal is far from commonly practised in a globalised and post-apartheid South Africa. Rapid urbanisation, westernisation, and the current consumer culture means that the capitalist value systems entrenched with living in a modern age (White 2010) not only alienate people from their traditional roots, but have also in recent years, allowed for evocative hybridisation of buildings demonstrating class struggles, ideological struggles and, certainly the compromised position of being in a rapidly changing world. This is exacerbated by the swelling informal communities which have established themselves on lands in proximity to the cities, and within which little of any memory of the

practice of the homestead in rural life remains; people prefer to return to the rural areas in which to communicate with their ancestors (White 2010, Whelan 2016). However, people of more established financial circumstances will often purchase or build a western style house in the city suburbs, including a separate dwelling for the ancestors, embodying, importantly, the umSamo, the religious space reserved for them.

They embrace the need to house the accoutrement of 21st century living, and at the same time, present an established 'home' to which the ancestors are ritually brought and housed. Simultaneously, for many years in the rural areas, circular buildings predominated demonstrating a distinct reticence to adopt orthogonal building forms.

However, more recently, homesteads display rectangular buildings colloquially referred to as 'iflat' (Frescura 1989) with an ancestral building separate from the modern house. The ancestors thus still dwell in their house, circular in form, and preferably thatched; Informants have, through the years indicated that thatch is important to signify to the ancestors where their home is.

These changes are not new, although it must be admitted that much more rapid adoption of form and adaptation of material have occurred in the last decade of the twentieth century, and the first decade of the twenty first, perhaps as a result of the intensified movement towards political freedom leading up to the first democratic elections in 1994 and the post-apartheid era since.

Early photographs generally show the pre-wattle-withie, squat, oval shaped huts, characteristic of the traditional use of *Dichrostachys cineraria* (Sickle Bush) for the frame. The short lengths of the branches of this tree meant that bowing would occur at the joints in the frame. Baines mentions also the use of lengths of 'mimosa'[3] fibre in the fixing:- 'Smaller rods are wattled all round, or bound tightly to the ribs with strips of the inner bark of the mimosa, or other tree..' (Lord *et al*;1975:246).

What is significant is that the arrival of the wattle, *Acacia mearnsii* sometime after 1824 significantly changed the profile of these buildings, and certainly by the turn of the 20th century, a more erect structure was enabled by the use of wattle.

Other changes effected were the raising of the dome on a cylinder, either low or high: informants indicate that this was carried out as goats tended to damage the base of the walls of the beehive dwelling, and photographs in Image 2 below attest that this was in practice in the late nineteenth century or at least in the early twentieth century.

Image 2 –Historical archival photograph showing woven base to thatched dome (KwaZulu-Natal Provincial Archives Repository) and contemporary example from north-eastern KwaZulu-Natal: notice Tsonga thatching (Author 2001)

The transition in form to dome-on-cylinder and cone-on-cylinder manifested as a result of available material, to some degree, and also as a result of acculturation and people movement. Resolutions based on the circular plan form are thus extensive (see Image 3) and all form an honest solution to the problem of shelter. Importantly, the spiritual aspects of the building remain, as do the symbols of the building as home. It is significant that these structures are generally temporary: buildings live and die with their owners, and need replacement from time to time when the materials rot, or are eaten by wood borer or termites. Whilst thermally efficient, they are fragile constructions, and are susceptible to fire. What is enduring is the ancestors themselves, inextricably connected with the space of the home and the medicine which protects it.

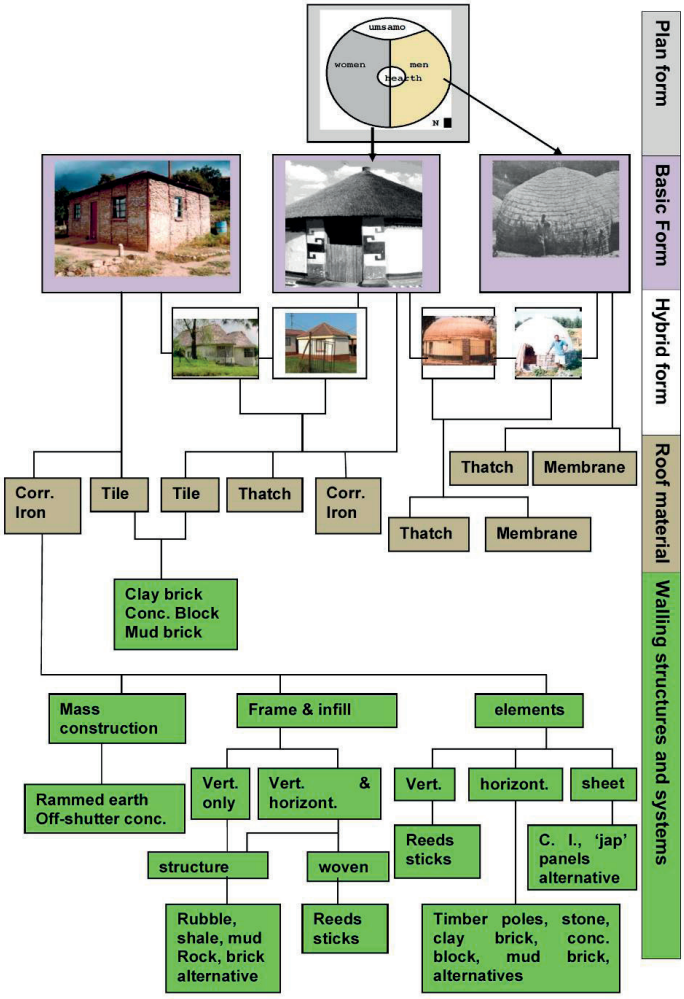

Image 3 – Suggested analysis of the various indigenous vernacular building forms in KwaZulu-Natal *(Author 2017)*

Whilst not directly related in terms of plan form, the orthogonal building is an import of the colonial era, yet was adopted in this region very slowly, and is significant because of its potential for creating architectural hybridities, as well as becoming more and more deployed in the rural landscape in recent decades: the materials used in its construction such as corrugated sheeting respond better to the regular shape, and the house is more efficient in terms of housing western style furniture. This building form is also that which is adopted to large degree in the construction of informal settlements, perhaps as they are easier to situate on steep slopes, or else that they truly are, as Nnamdi Elleh suggests, a symptom of modernity and capitalism (Elleh 1998). Informants living in informal settlements indicate that they are reticent to consult the ancestors in such rational buildings, and prefer instead, to visit them in the rural areas from which they come.

Importantly, this means that the common plan forms of circle and square produce myriad resolutions in the material form once elevated. This also suggests that there are multiple 'authenticities' in the building of houses and homes, and that whilst the iqhugwane itself may be revered as the aboriginal structure, it is the *umsamo* of the iqhugwane that is more significant than the physical building itself. This leads the discussion back to 'my culture'.

So where is 'my culture'?

It is suspected that the archetypal homestead, and the perfect beehive dwellings of the Illustrated London News and the immigration manuals are themselves part of the construct. At a large scale, historians and archaeologists argue for the development of the archetypal Zulu homestead, and the military kraals associated with Shaka ka Senzangakhona and his descendent kings of the Zulu, as part of a late eighteenth century inevitability of nation forming, in which clan and lineage groups reduced in political relevance and, certainly, the scale of the homesteads both physically and, perhaps, cognitively, grew. These suppositions based on an in depth understanding of a pre-colonial landscape in KwaZulu-Natal, as well as archaeological remains of later Iron Age settlements in the region have merit, and, certainly, the association of the beehive dwelling, the *iqhugwane,* thus form a critical part of Zulu identity, as these were the buildings constructed at the time of this rapid nationalisation, as well as being those first described by white colonial era visitors to the area and to the kings in particular. Further, these buildings were also those that were part of the aesthetic explorations of the colonial visitors: Descriptions of Zulu homesteads and the component buildings resonate with the visual, depictions of white settlers in written, drawn or photographic form. Nathaniel Isaacs in the early 1820s gives clear accounts of the buildings and traditions that he encountered, including trips across the Tugela to pay homage to the Zulu King, Shaka. There seems to be little else from this period that describes houses built out of anything except grass, and 'rude huts' could be a descriptive term of any kind of amorphous architecture. Drawings, particularly those by G.F.Angas in the late 1840s often depicted the *iqhugwane,* but these may also be fanciful representations of a perceived ideal. Baines, in 1866, noted in detail that: -'..the huts are hemispherical, like beehives, or rather like inverted bowls, slightly flattened on the top.

The thatching is very neatly and compactly done, and generally small ropes of grass are carried many times round and round the outside of the hut, and laced with smaller strips through the thatching to the inner frame' (Lord *et al* 1975:246-7).

Supporting this notion, the late historian Jefferson Guy commented that the 'perceived' notion of the Zulu homestead structure was indeed a construct itself, as part of the Shepstonian Natal Code of Native Law that was written into Act in 1891 and adopted by the then Colony of Natal. The Natal Colony then, prescribed how the homestead was to be formed in terms of a generic plan and spatial layout. Perhaps also the contribution of Eileen Jensen Krige's work on the Zulu People is similarly to blame: the creation of the identity of an amorphous mass of people collectively known as the Zulu without any of the subtleties of individual clan and family lineage evident in a general practise and general culture. Thus for the author the questions as to 'my culture' are then complex. Which culture – an aboriginal set of laws and practises which were subjected to Zuluisation? Zulu culture, and really, which one is that? Part of the mutating series of ideas and practises which are forced or enabled by modernity, modern materials, modern ways of doing and seeing things? Where is the idea of the authentic situated in these perceptions?

Authenticity and the intangible

So then, with the preceding discussion in mind, the question arises as to whether authenticity in this case is in the realm of the tangible, the built fabric and the form of the building, or rather what the building stands for itself as a symbol of Zulu nationality, and then as the home place in which the ancestors are entertained and the lineage is perpetuated. If a material authenticity is the goal of the definition in this case, which version of the material authenticity can be considered in itself to be authentic? At the same time, the indelible argument of 'my culture' prevails. The *Nara Document on Authenticity* indicates the need for an open approach to criteria for assessment and reinforces this by noting that 'the respect due to all cultures requires that heritage properties must be considered and judged within the cultural contexts to which they belong (Lemaire and Stovel, 1994: clause 11). Subsequently, *Nara + 20* defines authenticity as 'A culturally contingent quality associated with a heritage place, practice, or object that conveys cultural value; is recognised as a meaningful expression of an evolving cultural tradition; and/or evokes among individuals the social and emotional resonance of group identity' (UNESCO/ICCROM/ICOMOS, 2014). This fluidity is evident. Using the example of the indigenous vernacular buildings in KwaZulu-Natal, the statement 'My Culture' as a self-appropriated assertion, is one which has rapidly reinvented itself in order to sustain identity in a post-apartheid South Africa in which everything is in a state of change. Ironically, it would appear that the 'my culture' aspect is one that has been prodded and poked, and reached its current form through much manipulation, both from the aspect of the nationalisation of the Zulu in the 19th century and the expansion of the homesteads, to the imposition of empirical interpretations as embedded in the Natal Code of Native Law of 1891. In addition, there are two aspects of this with respect to buildings: the material and the form and its variations would all appear to be considered as authentic, as they are the places in which

the embedded notions of ritual and space are played out in the spiritual realm. Thus the authenticity is located in a palimpsest of the physical form.

For the space itself, the authenticity is located in a very personal position: it is common understanding of the self with relation to the family group and the ancestors, and depends on a relationship with space, rather than an aesthetic interpretation of space. Authenticity perhaps then, in indigenous vernacular buildings and the interpretation of space and place in Southern Africa, perhaps is lodged more firmly in the intangible, than the forms and materials that form the centre of heritage discussions in the west.

Conclusion

In 2016, ICOM South Africa and ICOMOS South Africa embarked on a series of workshops considering heritage and heritage management in the country; the Declaration on Museums and Cultural Landscapes 2016. This initiative arose out of a series of protests on colonial era monuments as part of the 2015 #Rhodesmustfall campaign.

Of interest, is that in the local workshop in Durban, the concept of space, attachment to place and the intangible were raised as important components in tacking the heritage debate in KwaZulu-Natal. This paper has considered a dynamic authenticity embedded in the building as a continuum of change, versus static and personal authenticity embedded in ritual and engagement with the metaphysical. The building remains as an indicator of its function. It follows then that the *iqhugwane* at the KwaZulu-Natal National Botanical Gardens in Pietermaritzburg may be considered authentic, despite its lopsided nature and incorrect construction and thatching, since authenticity is measured in the action of the place and not necessarily its form. This observation then forms a critical component of discussions in the country around heritage, memory and memorialisation, and perhaps limits the veneration of the image, the empirical and the constructed and focuses more on the intangible and sensory aspects of space and place.

Note

1 This is not only a natural border, but also existed as a political border in the 19th century, as the southerly depredations of Shaka ka Senzangakhona were effectively halted by a powerful chief, named Fodo of the Nhlangwini, who lived in this district. This then, strongly separates the Southern Nguni people in the Eastern Cape from their more northerly relatives in KwaZulu-Natal.

2 More complex analysis of these spaces was carried out by Kuper (1980), and the symbolic and metaphysical associations by Berglund (1989).

3 This would refer to one of the many different varieties of Acacia sp. found in the region, alternatively, this could in fact, refer to documented usage of *Acacia mearnsii* or the Black Wattle.

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